The Missing Link: Bridging the Gap Between Meiji Universalism, Postwar Pacifism, and Future Transreligious Developments

Michel Mohr, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Department of Religion

Content

Because of this section's focus on the future, in the second part of my presentation I will venture to speculate a little about developments that could occur in the forthcoming years. Yet, since I am not a fortune-teller, let us look first at some of the lessons learned from history.

I suggest that we follow three steps. First, we need to review some of the past gestures toward universalism in Japan. Secondly, I suggest that we examine some of the links to postwar Japan. Third, I will indulge in some ramblings about the future potential of ideas related to overcoming religious boundaries and of their application to Japan.

I. Introduction

As I was pondering these issues, it struck me that some of the same individuals who promoted universalism during the Meiji era, then turned quiet during the Pacific War, and finally reemerged with similar ideas during the postwar period. These individuals also exerted a major influence in shaping what I call "transreligious attempts" until not so long ago. This paper focuses on two examples, two individuals who also became friends: Nishida Tenkō, the founder of the Ittōen movement, and Imaoka Shin'ichirō, the former secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association who died in 1988 at age 106.

Why Does It Matter?

I argue that Nishida and Imaoka played a significant but neglected role in formulating or replicating ideas about universalism and also in forming alliances between organizations that, to this day, still promote transnational and transreligious agendas. Although they were instrumental in bridging the gap between Meiji and today, I do not hesitate to point out that these two men's legacy, or maybe the sketchy way it was later understood, may have contributed to the current *standstill* in the efforts to overcome petty national and denominational rivalries.

Link with Current Organizations

Well, speaking of a standstill may sound dismissive but this should not be misunderstood as criticism of the work being done by dedicated individuals. What needs to be highlighted is the deep continuity between the era of early globalization at the end of the nineteenth century and developments that took place after the Pacific War.

One of the best examples is the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), whose Japan Liaison Committee is still active. It first emerged in 1900 in Boston as the Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. It illustrates the "Unitarian connection," since Imaoka served as the secretary of the Japanese Unitarian Association between 1918 and 1921 before becoming one of the IARF's most ardent advocates in Japan in the 1950s.

Outline of Unitarianism

When talking about wars and their horrendous consequences, it is worth remembering that in addition to victims of physical violence, the first casualties are usually all the individuals and organizations involved in dialogue and attempts to reach out beyond national or sectarian boundaries. This is why nationalism and sectarianism tend to go along so well.....

In any case, because the "Unitarian connection" was mentioned I need to make sure that everyone is on the same page. Obviously, it is impossible to do justice to a movement that spread over several centuries in a few sentences but let me sketch some of its characteristics.

Sometimes it has been characterized as the left wing of the Reformation because, like in most revolutions, some wanted more radical changes. A few rationally inclined individuals challenged in particular the dogma of Trinity. A fascinating example is the physician Michel Servet, who was burnt at the stake in 1553 for having dared to express such heretical views. In spite of continuous repression, this movement spread throughout Europe and reached the United States, eventually resulting in the foundation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Having become the latest trend on the East Coast, it took a firm hold at Harvard. In short, Unitarians promoted a rational version of religion that encouraged free investigation, sometimes daring to claim that all religions are nothing but different expressions of the same truth. Obviously, this claim sounds attractive and very modern, but the reality on the ground, especially in Japan, did not always match those lofty ideals.

2. Past Gestures Toward Universalism (in Japan)

Regarding the Japanese side of the Unitarian saga, please forgive this minute of self-promotion but I must ask you to refer to the book that I just completed.

It is entitled *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*, and focuses on the time period between 1887 and 1922, during which the American Unitarian Association was present in Japan.

Aside from the tribulations of this particular movement and its eventual failure in Japan as an organization, these thirty-five years coincided with the peak of what can be summarized as "Meiji universalism." What is relevant for our reflections today is that Imaoka served as the

secretary of this association and, then, during the postwar period, pursued ideas that were very similar to the Unitarian ones. We need to pay attention to these early connections because they also help understand some of the shortcomings in recent attempts to replicate nineteenth-century ideas.

The Impact of Imaoka's Encounter with Nishida

Please allow me to skip large sections of the written version of this paper and to avoid discussing much of the prewar period. There is just one element of information that is crucial for understanding why Imaoka and Nishida Tenkō needed to be discussed together.

When Imaoka graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1906, he was appointed as minister in a Congregational church in Kōbe. It is during his tenure at this church that he made the acquaintance of Nishida Tenkō. Nishida inspired Imaoka to such an extent that, after three years at the Kōbe church, he decided to quit his position as a Christian minister. He simply couldn't stand preaching something he had not personally realized. This resulted from Nishida's emphasis on practice rather than on belief systems, which led him to suggest to Imaoka, "It would be good if you learned the Okada method of quiet sitting."[1]

Such were the circumstances that led Imaoka to return to Tokyo with the idea of furthering his research in the direction of a non-denominational approach to religion. Eventually, this translated into a lifelong effort to find the essence of what precludes distinctions between traditions.

Quiet Sitting

This is how Imaoka learned the quiet sitting method (*seizahō*) taught by Okada Torajirō, which was becoming increasingly popular among Japanese intellectuals. The breathing technique itself is not especially complicated and is very close to some of what is being taught in Zen temples but it seemed particularly attractive to those who were allergic to the rituals associated with Zen practice. For those identifying themselves with Christianity, it provided a way to learn a form of mindfulness technique without having to call it Buddhist meditation.

3. Link to Postwar Japan

If we ask:

- who were the few individuals who skillfully adopted some form of passive resistance during the war period?
- and who were the protagonists engaged in some form of dialogue and cooperation among Japanese religious traditions after the war?

1. Imaoka 1981, 360. Indicates the quiet sitting method (*Okadashiki seizahō* 岡田式靜坐法) of Okada Torajirō 岡田虎二郎 (1872–1920).

You already guessed that both Nishida and Imaoka, although they were not the only ones and although they handled these two challenges in different ways, played a significant role in this regard. What we need to investigate is how this occurred and what this could mean in terms of possible consequences for future attempts to move in a similar direction.

Shinto and Mason

Both Imaoka and Nishida needed to keep a low profile during the dark years of the Pacific War and before. On one hand they managed to avoid compromising with the war rhetoric but a key to their relative impunity seems to have been the ability to voice support for the emperor and to avoid openly confronting the war ideology.

In the 1930s, during the critical time when any discourse about internationalism was already taboo, Imaoka focused on conducting research on Shinto with his friend the American journalist Joseph Warren Teets Mason. This collaboration resulted in the publication of two monographs, which Imaoka translated into Japanese, and which are still widely read.

This particular interest in Shinto shrines also proved instrumental in projects that unfolded in the postwar period. The trips Imaoka and Mason made to Shinto shrines throughout Japan later were useful when Imaoka mobilized a segment of the Shinto clergy for his postwar activities. Thus, before and during the war Imaoka built relations of trust that served to support his new organization promoting transreligious cooperation. Eventually, Imaoka invited some of them to join the Japan Chapter of the IARF, the International Association for Religious Freedom.

The Role of Tsubaki Grand Shrine

Well, speaking of Shinto in general is not very helpful, since within Shinto there is such a wide range of traditions and approaches. By the way, this is one particular research area in need of further exploration and I regret not having succeeded in inviting a Shinto scholar to this conference, one of the reasons being that there are so few who speak English.

At any rate, Imaoka worked in particular with Yamamoto Yukitaka, the High Priest of Tsubaki Grand Shrine. According to Yamamoto's own account, their initial meeting took place in 1937, when Yukitaka was still a teenager and his father Yamamoto Yukiteru was the High Priest.

What is remarkable about the older Yamamoto is that he was "one the first conscientious objectors in Mie Prefecture"[2] because he refused to join the army. The fact that he was not imprisoned seems to be related to the ironical determination made in March 1935 that the Kami protecting the police was Sarutahiko, and that the main Shinto institution worshipping Sarutahiko was Tsubaki Grand Shrine.[3] Isn't that a wonderful twist of history?

2. International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom, 124.

A Japanese IARF President

One of the talents of Imaoka was precisely to connect people to each other. In this case, the relation he developed with Tsubaki Grand Shrine had huge consequences, as this shrine became one of the first Japanese religious organizations to join the former body of the IARF,[4] "with an introduction from Dr. Imaoka," as Yamamoto puts it.[5] Eventually, Yamamoto Yukitaka served as President of the IARF between 1996 and 1999.[6] He also contributed to introducing Shinto to the West, through the relation he developed with Jean Herbert (1897–1980) in Europe and through the establishment of Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America, now located in Granite Fall, in Washington State.[7]

4. Future potential

Now it's about time to shift our attention to the future by examining its anchors.

To make sure that everyone has a clear grasp of the surprising chain of events forming the backbone of today's presentation, let me briefly recap it here.

It seemed almost unbelievable when I discovered that Imaoka organized a World Conference for International Peace through Religion in May 1931 in Tokyo. Three years after the end of the war, he founded the Kiitsu Kyōkai (Return to Oneness Church).

Then, he helped organize a conference thirty-seven years after the first one, this time in Kyoto. Called the Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace, which opened in January 1968.[8] Two years later, this resulted in the creation of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (WCRP), one of the organizations still relatively active to this day even though it has changed its name to Religions for Peace.

The Ideal of Free Religion and Its Demise

One of Imaoka's dreams was embedded in his usage of the ambiguous term "free religion" (*jiyū shūkyō*). This also coincided with his creation of the Japanese Association for Free Religion. Four years later, in 1952, this group became the first Japanese religious organization to join the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom (later renamed IARF).

What is striking is that such ideals disappeared with their author and that Imaoka's legacy has been largely forgotten.

---

3. Yamamoto Yukitaka. 1997. *Tsubaki Ōkami Yashiro nisennen shi*, 148–150.
4. International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom.
5. Ibid., 113.
6. Ibid., 124.
7. First established in 1986 in Stockton, CA. See http://www.tsubakishrine.com/history/index.html (accessed March 15, 2014).
8. See Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace, ed. 1970. "Proceedings of the Japanese-American Inter-Religious Consultation on Peace, January 22, 1968."

The Current Crisis

Let me fast-forward to the current situation, which may provide a few hints regarding how things could evolve in the future.

The IARF celebrated its centennial in 2000, and will hold its next congress in Birmingham, England, in August of 2014.

The crisis, which seems symptomatic of a larger lack of initiatives, is that participation from Japanese organizations is dwindling. Tsubaki Grand Shrine has left altogether. One of the main criticisms that I heard during interviews conducted in 2013 is that the IARF is relying too much on the Japanese financial contributions and that it is losing its relevance and credibility as an international organization.

The current situation indicates that there is still an IARF Japan Liaison Group but none of the mainstream Japanese religious organizations are represented. Moreover, it has largely lost its appeal since the passing of Imaoka in 1988. He was a charismatic figure with a long history of bringing people together and functioned as a magnet to attract other religious leaders.

Shifts, Fragmentation, and Lack of Incentives

If we look at the various shifts that occurred in this association, it displays increasing signs of fragmentation, and hopes to expand it seem to have disappeared.

In the early phase of its expansion, in 1969 three new Japanese organizations joined the IARF at Imaoka's request:

- Risshō Kōseikai
- Konkōkyō Izuo Kyōkai
- and the above-mentioned Tsubaki Grand Shrine, which recently ceased its membership.

Later on, Ittōen joined the group in 1981, followed by Sōhonzan Shitennōji in 1990.[9] This leads to the observation that, although the intentions remain admirable, currently both the IARF and the WCRP have lost their appeal and gone stale, at least in Japan.

Possibility of Rekindling the Fire?

Rather than pointing out the current inertia of some of these structures, my objective is to consider how the ideas that sparkled their initial fire could be rekindled, or how some of their formulations may need to be rephrased. I do not pretend to have a ready-made solution, and any new initiative will need the consensus of a large group of dedicated people, but let me try to put some cards on the table.

For a long time, interreligious conversations, or so-called "dialogues," have been dominated in

9. International Association for Religious Freedom, ed. 2001, 113.

the West by monotheistic religions, in particular in the wake of Vatican II, whereas in Japan new religious movements have been the most active. It suggests that one of the main incentives for getting involved in such activities is the benefits that each organization can derive in terms of international recognition or outreach to a wider audience.

Another distinctive feature is that such events are usually organized by specific denominations. The majority of participants are ministers, ordained individuals, and believers from each religious tradition. Although their efforts should be praised, when observing such events from a distance, it is difficult to avoid feeling discomfort as we see the representatives of the various traditions dressed with their full regalia and religious attire. Moreover, such meetings often conclude with vague statements about world peace and good will, which are less than inspiring. I don't know about you but, occasionally, I get the impression that these superficial displays of cooperation will only contribute to perpetuate the status quo.

Alternatives?

What, then, could constitute a fruitful alternative? I think that the type of conversations we are having during this conference may provide a hint. There is an increasing need for *scholarly* conversations focusing on transreligious issues.

Thus, it would be worthwhile to explore the idea of some sort of academic structure focusing on the study of interreligious questions and cross-pollination between religious traditions. It would not compete with the other associations made of believers, which are also fulfilling an important role, and it could cooperate with them or serve as a consultative body for these groups. If there is enough interest in this idea, we can further explore it after this conference. Let me just float a tentative name for such an academic endeavor, which could be along the lines of Transreligious Research Association (TRA). This constitutes one fragment of the reflections on the future that I wanted to share with you today.

Why Japan in particular?

Now there is one more delicate question that needs to be addressed. Some of you may wonder about the relation between Japanese religions, these dreams of transreligious conversations, and a nonviolent future. Why Japan in particular? And is there some specific potential in Japanese religions that could contribute to the task?

On one hand, Japan displays one of the most diverse religious landscapes on earth. It could also be argued that the trauma of wartime, when properly processed, has the potential to yield an inexhaustible source of generosity. The movie that will be screened tonight, *Gate: A True Story* provides an inspiring testimony to this type of dedication.

On the other hand, any claim about Japanese uniqueness is highly suspicious and there is nothing more dangerous than resurgences of nationalist discourse under various guises.

Thirdly, because of its religious plurality and the conservative tendency within its religious traditions, Japan can serve as a perfect testing ground for new attempts to reach out beyond the thick walls of religious ideas and sectarian identities.

Conclusion

I hope that this broad snapshot of Japanese religious and intellectual history has contributed to show to what extent the formulations of universalism that emerged during the Meiji era were not as disconnected as it may seem from the efforts to promote peace and dialogue after the war. Imaoka Shin'ichirō and Nishida Tenkō illustrate the neglected continuity between these two time periods.

Furthermore, I suggested that some of the ideas proposed by these idealists could be revisited and provide hints about ways to overcome the current inertia in transreligious conversations, since they succeeded to a large extent in gazing beyond the confines of particular religious traditions.

Now, I think that adopting a non-sectarian perspective is the *prerequisite*, not the goal. This is why I envision utilizing the whole range of scholarly tools, including lessons learned from history, to progress toward the construction of conceptual frameworks that could withstand jingoistic onslaughts and could also yield concrete educational benefits.

Thank you for your attention and for your support!